

27. Maccoby, Hyam, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (Barnes & Noble Books 1986)

This is the book that first introduced me to the idea that original Christianity, under Peter, was a variant on Judaism, a Jewish Christianity. What came later, from Paul, was based on Paul's own revelations, not on the ideas and ideals coming from those who were Jesus' chosen followers during his lifetime. The Pauline religion was set up in competition with that original Christianity, and with the destruction and dispersion of the Jews it was the Pauline version that survived and was written over the original version of the earliest Gospel, Mark, on which the later Gospels are based.

This book seems to me to be much more likely to be reflective of historical reality than the much more radical Freke and Gandy version. In fact Maccoby hardly pays any attention to the Gnostics except as the Pauline Christian vision reflects some Gnostic ideas. Clearly in his view the original Christians were not Gnostics, because he cites the Ebionites, as evidenced by their extant writings, as being the closest to what he feels the original Christians believed.

So does he believe there was a historical Jesus? He suggests he was a Pharisee, on pages 29 through 44, and makes a very convincing case in part by showing that other Pharisees were very close in both their statements of belief and their suggested reforms to that which was said and suggested by Jesus. He suggests the anti-Pharisee (and anti-Jewish) statements were added to the New Testament manuscripts by followers of Paul.

Why Paul's attitude toward the Pharisees? Because, says, Maccoby, he was a pagan convert to Judaism who tried to become a Pharisee but was likely rejected (p. 98). After the fall of Jerusalem when there simply was no longer an

infrastructure with Pharisees to contradict him he passed himself off as having been one, claims Maccoby. Interesting.

On pages 80-81 we are told that Paul, then Saul, was part of the High Priest's police force. This was a secret police that attacked and terrorized not just Christians but others who found public fault with the quisling office of the High Priest. Why were they criticized? Because they were in cahoots with the Roman oppressors, even appointed and protected by them from reprisals by those whom they oppressed.

Maccoby does a masterful and very convincing job of showing his points from Jewish history, custom and law. This is a very forcefully written book. It contradicts, but subtly, several others on this list. For example, Fox felt the trials of Jesus and Paul were written by someone who knew the jurisprudence of the time and place, and Maccoby says a flat "no" to that notion. But I am not an expert and can't judge between them.

Maccoby says Paul invented the Eucharist. It takes him from page 112 to 118 to make this case. I was shocked by that claim since several other writers said that the Jerusalem Church practiced a common meal of thanksgiving. That is so, says Maccoby, but the Eucharist of Paul was very different from the communal meals of the earlier Christians. Maybe so. Maccoby claims that since Paul's letters came before the Gospels, his claimed revelation of Christ instituting the Eucharist was inserted into the Gospels by the writers by then under Pauline influence. Maybe so.

Maccoby comes closest to a Freke and Gandy type statement when he concludes this topic (p. 18):

A survey of the evidence thus confirms that Paul and no one else was the creator of the Eucharist. He

gave authority to this new institution, which he actually derived from mystery religion, by adducing a vision in which he had seen Jesus at the Last Supper, giving instructions to his disciples about performing the Eucharistic rite. This vision of Paul's was later incorporated as historical fact into the Gospels, in the accounts given there of the Last Supper, and thus has been accepted as historical fact by the vast majority of New Testament scholars. The followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, who were pious Jews and would have regarded the idea of eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood as repugnant, never practiced this rite, but simply took communal meals prefaced by the breaking of bread, in the manner sanctioned by Jewish tradition for fellowships within the general community of Judaism.

So, what do I think of this? Maybe so. But did Paul really teach the doctrine of transubstantiation as Maccoby here claims? I think not. 1 Cor. 11:23-30 is cited to make this claim, as well as John 6:53-58, which serves as an example of a later writer making it an even more blatantly pagan idea that caused some to leave the church (pp. 112 and 115). Here is where I would agree with Freke and Gandy, the orthodox took this language much too literally. The Gnostic spiritualization of these ideas is much more appropriate, and that is simply that by remembering the body and the blood while partaking a person is identifying with and becoming one with Jesus. It is a spiritual experience, not a literal one.

So, what does Maccoby say about Paul being a Gnostic? Does he support Freke and Gandy's claim that he was? No, not really. He says on pages 186 through 188 that Paul, essentially, adopted and adapted Gnostic ideas and images and Christianized them. Where the Gnostics spake of an inferior creator Paul says an evil power has taken over this world. Where the Gnostics say it was an evil power that

produced the Torah, Paul says angels did it and God has now replaced it. In Acts and Hebrews where the angelic origin of the Torah is also mentioned, it is again Paul's lead that is being followed.

In other words Paul borrowed from pagans but was not a pagan. He borrowed from Gnostics but was not a Gnostic. He borrowed from Judaism but ceased being a Jew for all intents and purposes, as his role in the founding of the Gentile Church became his whole life.

The chapter in Maccoby's book of greatest interest to me was number 15 on the Ebionites. Here are some ideas and quotes I thought were instructive with respect to the nature of earliest Christianity:

On the first few pages of this chapter (pp. 172-174) Maccoby discusses the tendency of scholars to make the earliest Christians at Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians under James, into the re-Judaizers that dogged Paul. They cite Matthew as the Gospel showing the Jewish Christian viewpoint because it has Jesus saying positive things about the Law and the need to keep it. He says that more recently scholars have made the astute observation that if Matthew was a Jewish Christian work, it is a strange one because it contains things about the guilt of the Jews, as a whole people, in murdering Christ, that would never ever have been a Jewish Christian thought. It was rewritten to fit the Pauline view of Christianity, but the fact that it was well known that Jesus did indeed say positive things about the Law caused these statements to be felt in.

Maccoby, on pages 174 and 175, brings the Ebionites, first known as the Nazarenes and the "poor people," in as witnesses for the beliefs of the earliest Christians under James. It was the Jewish War of AD 66 and the destruction of the temple and dispersal of the Jews (and the Jewish

Christians who did not escape to Pella, Maccoby says) that led to the demise of the Jamesian community as Christianity's source of leadership. The Ebionites split into factions after that, with some strange deviations: there was even a Gnostic-Ebionite sect under Cerinthus!

On pages 176 and 177 Maccoby makes several statements worth quoting:

In general, however, the Nazarenes or Ebionites held fast to their original beliefs which we find mentioned again and again in our Christian sources: that Jesus was a human being, born by natural process from Joseph and Mary; that he was given prophetic powers by God; that he was an observant Jew, loyal to the Torah, which he did not abrogate and which was, therefore, still fully valid; and that his message had been distorted and perverted by Paul, whose visions were deluded, and who had falsely represented Jesus as having abrogated the Torah.

In view of the thesis, argued earlier, that the Nazarenes were a monarchical movement of which James was the Prince Regent and Jesus the awaited King, we may ask whether there is evidence that the Nazarenes or Ebionites of later times looked upon Jesus as their King. Most of our Christian sources do not mention this aspect. Instead, they stress that the Ebionites, while insisting that Jesus was no more than a man, achieved prophetic status by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, which was identical with 'the Christ', a divine power. Of course, the Gentile Christian historians who wrote these accounts were strongly affected by the Pauline Christian definition of the word 'Christ', by which it lost its original Jewish monarchical meaning and became a divine title (partly because it became assimilated, in the Hellenistic mind, to the

Greek word *chrestos*, meaning 'good', which was a common appellation of divine figures in the mystery religions). Apart from this inauthentic use of the word 'Christ', the accounts ring true; for the idea that prophecy is attained by the descent upon a human being of a divine force (called in the Jewish sources 'the Holy Spirit' or *ru'ah ha-qodesh*, or sometimes the *shekhinah* or indwelling presence of God) is common in Judaism, and must have been shared by the Ebionites. But the monarchical overtones of the word 'Christ' (Hebrew *Messiah*) are lost in most of these Christian accounts. Where the monarchical aspect reappears, however, is in the occasional mention of the millenarian or chiliastic beliefs of the Ebionites, who believed that Jesus, on his return, would reign for a thousand years on Earth.<sup>6</sup> Here the concept of Jesus as King of the Jews (and by virtue of the priest role of the Jewish nation) spiritual King of the whole world is clear, and the Ebionites are shown to regard Jesus as the successor of David and Solomon. The thousand-year reign does not point to a concept of Jesus as a supernatural being, but reflects the common idea that human longevity in Messianic times would recover its antediluvian dimension.

This is a radically differing notion of who and what Christ is in the Pauline Christianity known today. Maccoby goes on, on page 177, to discuss the importance of millenarianism to the Jews and the Jewish Christians, and how despite attempts to discourage it it is also found in the Christian faith after Paul (the Book of Revelation is an example, as are some sayings of Jesus and even Paul). According to Maccoby, however, the prominence of millenarianism in the Ebionite writings gave the a seamless link back to Judaism:

In the beliefs of the Ebionites, however, it plays a

natural and integral part, and helps to characterize Ebionitism as continuous with Judaism, as well as with the 'Jerusalem Church' led by James, the brother of Jesus.

Next Maccoby shows that the Ebionite insistence that Jesus was a prophet (in opposition to those who had declared the days of prophets and prophecy to be over) is reflected in Jesus' own words, but also led them to trouble with the Jewish authorities who felt it was a good thing that prophets were no more (they are so difficult to control!). Pages 177 and 178:

The prophetic role assigned to Jesus by the Ebionites also deserves some comment. Even in the New Testament, there is much evidence that Jesus, in his own eyes and in those of his followers, had the status of a prophet. Thus some of his followers regarded him as the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, with whom John the Baptist had also been identified. Jesus saw himself, at first, as a prophet foretelling the coming of the Messiah, and it was only at a fairly late stage of his career that he had come to the conviction that he was himself the Messiah whom he had been prophesying. Jesus then combined the roles of prophet and Messiah. This was not unprecedented, for his ancestors David and Solomon were also regarded in Jewish tradition as endowed with the Holy Spirit, which had enabled them to write inspired works (David being regarded as the author of most of the Psalms, and Solomon of the canonical works, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs). Nevertheless, these works were not regarded as having the highest degree of inspiration, and were included in the section of the Bible known as the 'Writings', not that known as the 'Prophets'. Jesus was not the author of inspired

writings, but he belonged, in his own eyes, to the ranks of the non-literary, wonder-working prophets such as Elijah and Elisha. Such a prophet had never before combined his prophetic office with the position Messiah or King, but there was nothing heretical about the idea that the Messiah could be a prophet too. Such a possibility is envisaged in the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, where the Messiah is described as an inspired person and as having miraculous powers, like a prophet.

So, if Jesus was fulfilling roles with recognized authority in Judaism, what was the problem? (Pp 178-179)

On the other hand, this belief in Jesus as an inspired prophet is what ultimately cut off the Ebionites from the main body of Judaism. As long as Jesus was alive his claim to prophetic and Messianic status was not in any way heretical; Pharisee leaders such as Gamaliel were prepared to see how Jesus' claims would turn out in actuality and meanwhile would suspend judgment: in Gamaliel's phrase, 'if this idea of theirs or its execution is of human origin, it will collapse; but if it is from God, you will never be able to put them down, and you risk finding yourselves at war with God' (Acts 5: 39). Even after Jesus' death, for some considerable time, the Pharisees, in view of the Nazarene claim that Jesus' movement had not yet 'collapsed', Jesus being still alive and on the point of return, would be prepared to suspend judgment, as evidenced by Gamaliel, who was speaking after the death of Jesus. But as time went on, these Nazarene claims would wear very thin as far as the main body of the Jewish community was concerned. How long did one have to wait in order to reach a decision that the Nazarene movement had collapsed? Jesus had failed by being crucified, and the assurance

by the Nazarenes that he would return had not been fulfilled. The conclusion reached by most Jews, therefore, was that Jesus was just another failed Messiah. As for his alleged prophetic powers, these must have been delusions. He was not after all a genuine prophet or his prophecies about himself would have been fulfilled. The Ebionites, however, still refused to accept this conclusion; though no doubt some of them, weary of waiting for Jesus' return, went back to the fold of normative Judaism and gave up their belief in Jesus as Messiah and prophet.

So, the Pharisees were bending over backwards to allow them their fantasy, but there finally came a point where the belief in a returning Messiah became untenable. On page 179 Maccoby says that the Ebionites, following good historical precedent, produced a Gospel with Jesus' sayings and acts in them. He was their prophet, one as great as, if not greater than, any who had come before. Hence it was perfectly legitimate to make up a book to commemorate his legacy. But . . . (p. 179):

This new scripture, for the main body of the Jews, was a heretical addition to the canon of holy writ, and its appearance marked out the Ebionites as a heretical Jewish sect, like the Samaritans and the Sadducees. Moreover, since the Ebionites thought that the age of prophecy had returned in the person of Jesus, they cannot have been willing to accept the authority of the Pharisee sages who built up a corpus of teachings after Jesus' death, on the assumption that the age of prophecy was over, having ceased with the last of the biblical prophets, Malachi. Thus the Ebionites, by their continued belief in Jesus as prophet and Messiah, were increasingly cut off from the developing activity of rabbinical Judaism. Yet it was probably not until about

AD 135<sup>10</sup> that the Ebionites were finally declared heretics by the Pharisee rabbis. This decision was no doubt influenced by the awareness of the rabbis that the Gentile branch of Christianity, following the teachings of Paul, had abrogated the Torah and developed anti-Semitic attitudes. This was the conclusive proof that Jesus' claim to Messiahship had not been 'from God'. Gentile Christianity, however, unlike Ebionite Christianity, was never declared heretical, since it was too far removed from Judaism to be regarded as a heretical form of it.

The Ebionites were thus in the unhappy position of being ostracized both by what was now the main body of Christians, the Catholic Church, and by the Jews. The pressure to join one or other of these two religions was enormous, and by the fourth century the Ebionites had ceased to be a discernible separate community.

Consequently, they have tended to be disregarded and despised by historians. Yet what remains of their testimony about the origins of Christianity is of unique importance, for, unlike the Catholic Church, they were directly linked to the 'Jerusalem Church' and thus to Jesus himself. Their testimony about Paul and the circumstances in which he broke with the 'Jerusalem Church' deserves to be treated with respect, not with the usual scornful dismissal.

In the remaining pages of this chapter, Maccoby discusses the source-materials that give insights into Ebionite beliefs. The source of most interest to me, since I used it myself in the 1970's (see item # 36) to shed light on Early Christian beliefs, is the *Clementina* (pages 180-181):

*The Pseudo-Clementine writings.* These writings were preserved as orthodox patristic works because they were falsely attributed to the authorship of Pope

Clement I, who was popularly supposed to have been a disciple of Peter himself. In fact, the core of these writings, as was pointed out by F. C. Baur in the nineteenth century and as most scholars now agree (after an interim of dispute and denigration of Baur's work), is Jewish Christian or Ebionite, stemming from second-century Syria. This core shows a staunch adherence to the Torah, and contains an impassioned attack on those who attributed anti-Torah views to Peter. Paul is not mentioned by name, but he is strongly hinted at as the supreme enemy under the guise of 'Simon Magus', against whom Peter is represented as polemicizing. Peter's attack on this lightly disguised Paul is on the grounds that he is a false prophet, that he has spread lies about Peter and, most telling of all, that he knows nothing about the true teachings of Jesus, since he never met him in the flesh and bases his ideas of Jesus on delusive visions. That this 'Simon Magus' is really Paul is now accepted by scholars, despite many desperate attempts to resist this conclusion made by critics of Baur who realized how profound would be the consequences of such an admission. For it shows that Paul, far from being a unanimously accepted pillar of the Church, like Peter, was a controversial figure, whose role in the founding of Christianity was a subject of great contention.

Maccoby uses these sources to support the main contention of the entire book: Paul is the inventor of Christianity as we know it today. I agree that is what the Ebionites said. But I also agree with several other sources reviewed here that Paul was not as far off the Jewish-Christian mark as Maccoby argues him to be.

Maccoby's book has a little bit of personal history in my life. When I first bought and read it, I told my father about it and

that a lot of what he said made sense. My father, now deceased, got angry and said that reading about Christian origins in a book by a jew made at much sense as reading about Mormon origins in a book by a Hindu. He said to go with believers if you want to learn about a religion. His vehemence in saying that surprised me. Then later I found out that this non-believer was just in a believing phase, temporarily, and I hit him with this critical stuff just as he thought he was a Christian again. Oh well. I was strongly believing Christian with a Mormon flavor, and I thought the book to make a lot of sense in explaining what seem to me to be very troubling aspects of the New Testament story: like Crossan I never did buy this idea that a whole nation of people was after Jesus' blood and wanted to go out of their way to become guilty of spilling it. It is just not how nations operate. Most people were worried about surviving, liked the charismatic man coming through town telling them of God's love, that it is easy to live the commandments by simply loving God and your neighbor, and giving them hope of better days ahead. There simply was no reason to kill this man unless you were part of the power structure and were irritated by the power given this man by the very people who are said to have clamored for his death. Maccoby and Crossan (see item # 11) both do a good job straightening that one out.